

FRANK READE



WEEKLY MAGAZINE,

Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Application made for Second-Class Entry at N. Y. Post Office

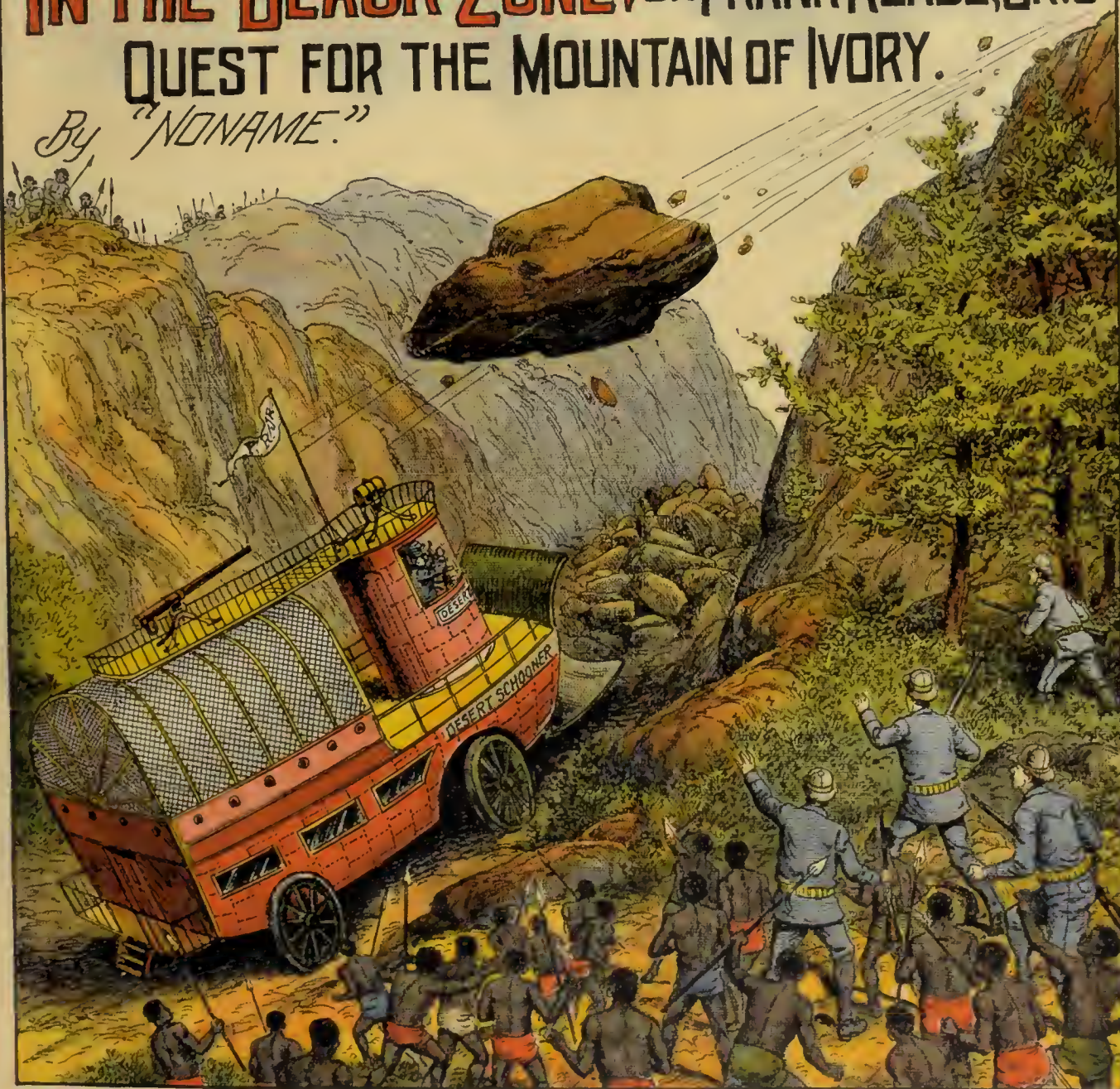
No. 90.

NEW YORK, JULY 15, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

IN THE BLACK ZONE; OR FRANK READE, JR.'S QUEST FOR THE MOUNTAIN OF IVORY.

By "NONAME."



Just before the awful boulder reached the machine, it struck an obstacle—an up-cropping of the ledge—and gave one giant leap into the air. Clean over the Schooner it shot, and crashed down the mountain in its rear.

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CHAPTER I.

THE EXPLORER'S STORY.

"STANLEY SEARS,
"CONGO FREE STATE, AFRICA."

Thus the card read which Barney O'Shea had placed in his hand by a tall, powerfully built man of about thirty, with a bronzed complexion, and eyes keen and penetrating as those of a Hawkshaw.

The Celt glanced shrewdly at the visitor, and said:

"Misther Frank Reade, Jr., gave orders, sor, that he was not to be disturbed. Is it a bit important, sor?"

"It is very important, my man," replied Stanley Sears; "all that I ask of you is to hand him the card. He will be satisfied the moment he sees it."

"I'll do that, sor."

Barney closed the wicket gate and vanished. Sears awaited his return.

He had come to Readestown upon a very important mission, as we shall see.

He had returned from ten years of thrilling experiences in the Black Zone of Africa. One day, while sitting in the reading-room of the Waldorf, in New York, he had chanced to find a startling series of paragraphs in the newspaper. Thus they read:

"The latest from Readestown has it that Frank Reade, Jr., the young inventor, whose fame is world-wide, has completed his new invention, the Desert Schooner, and is soon to undertake a trip to some far part of the world.

"People will await with interest the confirmation of this report, and also what will be the result. It is said that the Schooner excels all of his past inventions. If so, it must indeed be a triumph."

Sears read and reread this item, which was of more than ordinary interest to him.

Then he muttered:

"That must be the Frank Reade, Jr., I heard of once on the upper Nile. If so, and his invention is what I hear it is, he is just the man I want. Readestown is his home, eh? I wonder where that can be?"

He made inquiry, and very quickly learned where Reade-town was. That settled it.

The next train took him to the inventor's home. Deep down among the hills was the smart little town.

He presented himself at the gate of the Reade Machine Works, and gave Barney his card, as we have seen.

Frank Reade, Jr., was busy in the great draughting-room, where he made the plans of all his machines. As Barney entered, he looked up in annoyance.

"I thought I told you that I was busy, Barney?" he began.

"Shure, sor, an' ye did," replied the Celt, "but here's a gentleman says that as soon as ye see his card, ye'll drop everything to see him."

"He must be a mighty dignitary, then," said Frank, sharply. "The card!"

He glanced at it and gave a start. Then he knitted his brows reflectively a moment.

"Stanley Sears! That must be the fellow I heard so much about in Central Africa. It may be—that is—" he dropped his pencil; "show him in, Barney," he said; "I will see him."

The Celt ducked his head and vanished. In a few moments he was at the wicket gate.

"Misther Frank will see yez, sor," he cried; "plaze to walk in."

The visitor's face lit up with pleasure and satisfaction.

"I knew that he would not refuse," he declared. "I hope to enlist his interest and sympathies further."

He followed Barney's lead, and in a few moments was in the draughting-room and face to face with Frank Reade, Jr.

The young inventor arose and faced his visitor. They gazed into each other's eyes, and from that moment were warm friends.

"Mr. Reade?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am glad to have the honor. You saw my card?"

"I did, Mr. Sears. Pray have a seat."

"You are not altogether a stranger to me, Mr. Reade. Some years ago on the upper Nile I heard of you."

"Exactly; and I heard of you in the same way."

"Then we ought to feel well acquainted?"

"You are right."

"I will make my business brief. I came to see you upon quite an important matter. I understand that you have built a machine called the Desert Schooner, aboard which a man can travel in the most dangerous of regions with comparative safety?"

"That is true," replied Frank. "The Schooner was designed for that very purpose."

"And also that you meditate a trip to some far part of the world?"

"That is also true."

"The object of such a trip is mainly to seek wild adventure and exploration. Am I right?"

"You are."

"Very good," said Sears, drawing a deep breath. "Now you know that exploration is the one aim of my life. I live for it and nothing else."

"I have understood that."

"This brings us down to the point. I will be brief. During my explorations in Africa I learned of a very wonderful region somewhere along the equator. It is a region hemmed in by high mountains and known as the valley of the Giant Elephant Hunters.

"No white man has ever been able to penetrate this region. Livingstone, Speke and other great explorers have attempted it many times and failed. No man can get beyond that black barrier. The giants are fierce and warlike and not to be pacified.

"The only way to invade that region is to go invested with a coat of mail or such means of offense and defense as will make life safe. Now, it is the crowning desire of my life to explore that region. Its most notable feature, report has it, is the wonderful mountain of ivory.

"For centuries these giant blacks and their ancestors have been engaged in elephant hunting. With the ivory they have constructed a mountain said to be fully a thousand feet high. The wealth of the ivory mountain can hardly be computed. It would enrich a regiment. This is the story. Now for my errand. With your co-operation on board your wonderful Desert Schooner, I believe that we could safely invade and conquer that region.

"The benefits to be derived can hardly be computed. We need have no compunctions on the score that we are conquerors, for the giant blacks are a menace to the entire region about, and to make war upon them is legitimate and proper."

Sears paused and regarded Frank attentively for a moment. Frank was silent for a spell.

Then he reached up and took down a chart from a shelf.

"Let me see," he said, "that ivory mountain should be about here." He placed his finger on the map.

"A little more to the east," replied Sears.

"The nearest point to start from then would be Labreville in the French Congo region?"

"I think so."

Frank closed the chart book, and consulted a note-book. After some time he ventured to remark:

"Your plan is to strike in among the elephant hunters as a conqueror."

"Yes."

"Would not pacific means be best?"

"Assuredly, if they would work. But these savages are not to be dealt with in that manner. They are the worst class of natives in the dark continent."

"I am interested in your project," declared Frank, candidly.

"Good!" exclaimed Sears, joyfully.

"In fact, I may say that it presents just the enterprise I have been looking for. The Schooner is equipped for just such work."

"Nothing could be better."

"Before we go further, however, let us discuss all the pros and cons, and sift matters thoroughly."

"I agree to that."

As it might be wearisome to the reader, we will not dwell upon the conversation which followed. For fully two hours the two men debated the project.

By that time each thoroughly understood the other, and the matter was adjusted.

Frank touched a bell.

In an instant a comical negro appeared from some unknown region.

"Pomp!" said Frank, sharply.

"Yes, sah!"

"You are to find Barney, and acquaint him with the fact that we are to start for the west coast of Africa within the week."

The coon's eyes rolled.

"For Afrieky, sah?"

"Yes."

"A'right, sah."

"Be sure to have all in readiness aboard the Schooner for the start, and be ready yourselves. You understand?"

"I does, sah."

"You may go."

The coon disappeared. Then Stanley Sears gripped Frank's hand.

"Here's success to our project!" he cried. "We shall win great renown! You are a man after my heart. Mr. Trade!"

Frank laughed at this, and said:

"Time will tell. Be on hand by Thursday, sure."

"I will."

A few moments later Sears was gone. Then Frank be-

gan industriously storing away his paper. There was work ahead for him now.

There came a light tap on the door.

"Come in!"

It opened, and on the threshold timidly stood Barney, the Irishman, and Pomp, the negro. They stood there, respectfully ducking and bowing.

"Well," said Frank, brusquely, "what is it, you fat rascals?"

"Shure, sor, is it thrue that we be goin' to Afriky?" asked Barney.

"Yes," replied Frank. "I want you to have the Schooner ready at the earliest possible day."

"Whurroo!" shouted Barney, turning a hand-spring.

"Ki yi!" screamed Pomp, with a double shuffle, and away they scampered, full of delight at the prospect.

CHAPTER II.

IN CENTRAL AFRICA.

For the reader's better comprehension let us take a brief look at the Desert Schooner.

Frank's latest invention was truly his most wonderful.

It was his first purpose to construct a vehicle which should not be cumbersome, and yet be roomy and strong, and capable of traveling at fair speed over rough ground.

It should also be bullet proof and provided with means of defense, for in strange lands and wild countries there was no telling what perils they might encounter.

So he selected thin but toughened steel for the framework and body of the Schooner. The dimensions were some forty feet in length by eight in width. This made the vehicle so roomy that it could be divided into various convenient compartments.

Frank took slightly as a model the old-fashioned prairie schooner. But, of course, the make-up of the vehicle was essentially different from that famous though antiquated craft.

The running work of the Schooner was a marvel.

It was symmetrical, light and strong. The wheels were four in number and provided with rubber tires.

The body which sat upon this running gear was of plates of steel, and for a height of four feet was plain work. Then there rose a structure, barrel-shaped, of fine steel netting, which was bullet proof.

The advantage of this was easily to be seen. The voy-

agers could look in any direction and be always sure of light and air, and be thus doubly secure from sudden attack.

Above the roof of netting was a narrow platform or deck, protected by a guard-rail. Upon this platform was one of the most important adjuncts of the vehicle.

This was the famous electric gun, the invention of Frank Reade, Jr., and probably the most deadly weapon known.

It was mounted upon a swivel, was long of barrel, and extremely light, one man being easily able to lift it.

But it was provided with pneumatic tubes and chambers which, operated by electricity, would enable it to throw a dynamite shell two miles with deadly results.

Forward of this was a short deck leading to the pilot-house, a round tower with plate-glass windows. Upon it there was mounted a powerful searchlight.

There were windows and loopholes for firing, in the sides of the Schooner. Taken altogether it was well equipped for defense.

The interior of the vehicle was furnished and fitted up in a luxurious fashion. No detail was omitted to make it a literal palace on wheels.

There were stores and ammunition on board sufficient for a long trip. The electric engines were operated by dynamos and a system of storage batteries, the construction of which was one of Frank Reade, Jr.'s secrets.

In the pilot-house there was a keyboard, where the operator could sit and direct the course and regulate the speed of the vehicle with the greatest ease, by simply pushing a button or pulling open a lever.

This constitutes a very meagre and incomplete description of the Schooner. We will, however, leave the details to be woven in with the incidents as our story progresses.

Frank Reade, Jr., was more than pleased with the plan proposed by Stanley Sears. The project seemed to promise just what he wanted—viz., excitement, peril, and an ultimate object, which was the capture of the Ivory Mountain.

He could hardly wait for the day of departure to come.

As it would be necessary to have the machine transported across several thousand miles of salt water to the shores of Africa, Frank proceeded to make arrangements therefor.

Fortunately, he had a friend in New York who was a sea captain and the owner of a tramp steamer. This was the Sea Bird, and she was a stanch vessel.

Captain Wellman expressed himself as only too delighted to accept Frank's terms and convey the Desert Schooner and party to the west coast of Africa; so the bargain was quickly made.

The Schooner was packed in sections aboard the steamer, and all was in readiness for the start.

Libreville, French Guinea, was the objective port. From there Frank reckoned on striking in a direct line through the Black Zone to the region of the Mountain of Ivory.

Stanley Sears joined the party in New York, fully equipped for the tour. He was in the highest of spirits.

So it happened that one day the Sea Bird stood out past Sandy Hook headed for the Azores, that being the most direct course for their objective point. The great project was begun.

Now, with the reader's kind permission we will change the scene to one of the wildest jungles in Central Africa. We will take a critical moment when a man, who is to figure as one of the foremost characters of our story, was in the most deadly of peril.

He was at the moment crouching behind a pile of eanes and brakes, with a finger upon the hammer of his rifle. Before him was a thrilling spectacle.

For there in the center of the glade or clearing stood a monster specimen of the African lion.

His eyes were wildly glaring, his mouth dripping with white froth, and his tail was wildly lashed to and fro.

It was evident that the animal was in a savage temper and likely to discover his human foe at any moment. The result of such a contingency can be easily imagined.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Stanley Sears, for he it was, "this is a bad scrape. If I get out of it with a whole skin I shall be lucky."

He crouched still lower behind the eanes and watched his foe with a deadly fascination.

For a few moments the lion remained in his position furiously roaring until the ground fairly trembled. Then he suddenly ceased and swung about, drawn up to his fullest height. Such a sudden change of demeanor was a keen surprise to Sears.

But the next moment he was able to gain an adequate explanation of the affair.

An intervention was at hand to save him from what might have been a fearful fate. Another combatant appeared on the scene.

A huge black body came crashing through the brakes. It emerged into view, and stood revealed as a baby elephant. Sears was astonished.

The little elephant paused at sight of the lion, and began to trumpet fiercely. Then the king of beasts let forth an awful roar, and sprang for the little fellow.

"That is too bad," muttered Sears, bringing up his rifle. "It is not fair play. I'll give the hon another bullet."

But he did not fire.

There was little need, for the baby elephant had a champion at hand. There was a furious roar, and out of the jungle there lunged the mother elephant, a monster of her species.

The lion had sprung for the baby elephant's head. Had he alighted there, it would have been serious for the baby.

But the little fellow reeled back, and, wildly trumpeting, swung out of the lion's reach, and the savage beast alighted directly in the path of the mother elephant.

What followed was like the twinkling of an eye.

Down came the giant trunk with awful force upon the lion's back. Then followed the huge feet.

Such tremendous weight could not but crush anything, and the lion was fairly buttered and bruised into a limp mass.

But he fought madly, and brought great rivers of blood from the elephant's sides.

It was truly a battle royal.

And Sears watched it with grim interest.

He took care that the elephant did not spy him, for she was in just the mood to attack anything or anybody, though she had been his champion and had saved his life.

So the explorer crept silently away into the jungle, congratulating himself upon his narrow escape.

The rencontre with the lion was partly his own fault. He had left his friends aboard the Schooner for an hour's diversion in the jungle in quest of pheasants.

By chance he came upon the lion, and being at an available angle, conceived the hazardous plan of giving the monster a fatal shot.

"If I can carry back his skin to the Schooner," he reflected, "they will think that I am quite a sportsman after all."

So he aimed for the lion's heart, but just as he pulled the trigger the animal moved.

The bullet struck the lion, but not in a vital part. In a moment it came raving down into the jungle.

And, as we have seen, the venturesome explorer had a tight squeak for his life.

Through devious jungle paths Sears hastily made his way, until he came out upon a little stretch of intervalle leading to a river.

Here, upon a little rise of ground, was the Schooner. A fire burned in the grass near by, and Pomp was just roasting some pheasants and fish.

Barney was cleaning his rifle, and Frank was in the pilot-house. As Sears came up, Pomp cried:

"Jes' wants one mo' pheasant, sah. You'se jes' come in time."

"Here they are!" cried Sears, drawing half a dozen from his hunting pouch. "They are all cock, too."

"Youse am a berry fine hunter, sah!" declared Pomp. "Ebery one ob dese birds am shot frow de head."

"That is proper," declared Sears. "Don't spoil the meat, you know. But I came near being game myself."

"How was that, sor?" asked Barney, with interest.

And Sears told of his experience with the lion. At once Barney and Pomp were agog.

"Golly!" cried the coon, "yo' an' I mus' go aftah some big game, I'ish. It am a heap ob fun."

"I'll promise you plenty of excitement if you tree a lion," laughed Sears.

Then the trio received an electrical shock. Something came whizzing through the air, and whisked Barney's hat off, slick and clean.

CHAPTER III.

THE FEVER STORM.

An inch lower and the Celt's skull would have been cracked. The hat lay on the green sward, transfixed there by a keen-pointed javelin.

What followed took far less time than to describe it.

In that swift instant all three understood the situation, and they acted with thrilling rapidity.

Had they not, their lives would have paid the forfeit.

For it needed no further hint to apprise them of the fact that there were doubtless other javelins poised in dexterous hands in the jungle where that came from.

Over the rail aboard the Schooner they went.

But even then their escape was miraculous, for the javelins struck all about them.

Into the vehicle they rushed to meet Frank Reade, Jr., at the door of the pilot-house. He pressed a spring which instantly closed every door and window.

"We are attacked," cried Sears. "I think they are the giant blacks!"

"You do?" exclaimed Frank, in alarm; "that means a fight."

"Yes."

"Well, we ought to be good for them."

"Bejabers, an' that we are," cried Barney, grabbing his rifle; "bad cess to the omadhouns if they thrubble us!"

"Golly, dat's jes' wha' I say," shouted Pomp, as he followed the Celt's example.

They sprang to the loopholes ready to open fire on the black foe. But to their surprise not one was in sight.

That they were lurking in the jungle not one hundred yards away there was no doubt, however. It would not be safe to take any undue risk.

"Be me sowl, I can't see wan av the rascals," cried Barney; "shure, it's a foine way they have av disappearin'."

"Golly, I'se jes' a good mind to flush into dat heap ob grass," declared Pomp.

"I'll go yez, naygur."

This settled the matter. The two riflemen fired into the jungle, but without effect.

"They are wily fellows, aren't they?" exclaimed Sears. Frank's eyes twinkled.

"I know a way to start them out of there," he said, "and I have a great mind to use it."

Sears looked at him questioningly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

"The electric gun."

"Begorra!" exclaimed Barney, with wide-open eyes, "yez are roight, sor."

"Golly! I jes' like to see dem git a taste ob dat!" declared Pomp.

"Try it," said Sears, with sparkling eyes. "Will you not?"

"It might make a fearful slaughter."

"Have no compunctions on that score. If there only was some way to wipe them out of existence it would be the best thing in the world. They are the most atrocious of cutthroats."

"Yet they are human beings," said Frank, "and I shrink from it."

However, he climbed the little spiral stairway to the gun. After a moment's hesitation he decided to act.

He drew a line upon a hummock just in the edge of the jungle. There might be blacks behind it, and there might not. To tell the truth, he hoped there were not, as it was his desire to frighten rather than slaughter the barbarians.

It was but a moment's work to slip a shell into the breech of the gun. Then he carefully sighted it again.

He pressed the electric button.

There was a slight recoil, a hissing sound, and the shell struck the hummock full and fair.

There was a terrific roar, and up into the air rose a literal cloud of earth, stones, debris and grass. The cane growth for many yards about was mowed away as if with a keen scythe.

Black forms were momentarily seen flying into the darker depths of the jungle.

It was plain that the shot had told, and they were greatly terrified. Sears was delighted.

"Look at them run," he cried. "Give 'em another, Frank, while you've got the chance."

Frank acted upon the impulse and complied. He thrust another shell into the breech, and threw it into the jungle. For a wide distance the cane was leveled.

Whether any of the blacks fell a victim to this shot could not be told. There was no doubt now but that the vicinity was clear.

Sears was hilarious.

"By Jove!" he cried. "You can't beat that. I tell you that gun is big medicine, Frank. It can conquer Africa."

Frank smiled and closed the chamber of the gun. He descended into the cabin, and said:

"I think it will be as well for us to change our quarters. You think, do you, Sears, that those were the giant blacks of the Ivory Valley?"

"I know it," replied the explorer. "I had a good chance to see them."

"Then we must be somewhere near the region they inhabit."

"A few days' journey ought to take us there," declared Sears.

"Let us press forward then. Pomp, you may serve the dinner en route. It will do just as well."

"A'right, sah!"

The darky hastened away to obey this order. In a short while the meal was served, steaming hot, in the main compartment of the vehicle.

Barney was in the pilot-house directing the course of the machine. They were now traveling through an open part of the jungle.

Knives had been placed on the hubs and axles, which cut the cane as the machine went on, clearing a wide and adequate path.

After the meal was over Pomp relieved Barney for a time. A few hours later the jungle gave way to a broad, level veldt or plain close cropped by the buffalo.

Over this the Schooner could bowl merrily. Far away in the distance there was seen a mighty mountain chain.

Their peaks seemed to reach up into the clouds. Sears studied them a moment, and said:

"Beyond those mountains we shall find the land of the giant blacks. We ought to reach that region by to-morrow."

Frank studied the landscape.

"Yes," he agreed; "they are about seventy miles from here."

Barney, who was in the pilot-house, suddenly gave a sharp cry.

"Wud yez cast yure eye to the north, Misther Frank? Pluwativer do yez call that?"

Instantly Frank and Sears turned their gaze in that direction. A great cloud seemed to be rolling up from the horizon and momentarily increasing in volume.

Its color was a dingy yellow or brown, and for a moment it puzzled the voyagers.

Then Sears gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Mercy on us," he cried, "that is the African fever storm or sirocco. Put on speed, Barney; let us get to the hills before it will overtake us!"

"That is impossible," declared Frank. "What did you call it, Mr. Sears?"

"A fever storm."

"What is that?"

"It is a great hot wave of wind and dust and blinding hot spray, which is breathed across the country, leaving pestilence in its wake. It is followed by an intense humidity, supposed to be the cause of various terrible malignant fevers which are consequent. The natives dread it as their worst affliction, and will, if possible, retire to caverns or wooded depths, until the entire effects of the fever breeder are gone. Very likely the wind picks up these germs from malarial spots, and disseminates them in the atmosphere."

"Indeed," exclaimed Frank, with a shiver, "it must be a deadly foe. The best thing we can do is to dodge it."

"If we can."

"We must keep the doors and windows tightly shut until after it has passed."

"But—what shall we do for air?" asked Sears.

"I have provided for that. In the pilot-house there is a chemical generator, such as I use in my submarine boat. That will furnish plenty of air for the cabin."

"Good!" cried Sears; "that may be the saving of our lives. We should be beyond the verge of the fever district by to-morrow."

"That is true," agreed Frank. "I can see that traveling in this African country is by no means unattended with great peril."

"Humph! We have not begun to see them yet," declared Sears. "You can hardly wonder that the ivory district has never been invaded before."

"Very true."

"You see it is almost impossible for a man on foot to escape the consequences of exposure to such a storm as that just coming down upon us. He would sicken and die.

Wherein, aboard this vehicle we can meet it with impunity."

"I see the advantage," declared Frank, "but we must make use of it."

Frank set the oxygen generator at work. He also took the precaution to place certain disinfectants at the doors and windows.

The fever storm was coming rapidly nearer. Its approach could be easily marked on the barometer, and the sky assumed a coppery hue.

Then a hot, dry current of air swept down over the Schooner. It came in gusts, each fiercer and hotter than the other.

Then a great cloud of choking, blinding dust began to sift across the plain, making the ground look white and dreary.

Sears shivered, and said.

"That is what we are to fear. That awful dust. It penetrates everything, and carries death in its midst. To breathe that is akin to signing one's death warrant."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Frank. "What can the poor blacks do when they are overtaken by it?"

"They do the best they can. I have seen them rush into the water and actually hold their heads under the surface as long as they could."

The dust now came on in great blinding clouds. The humidity which accompanied the storm was frightful.

Every one of the voyagers had stripped to the waist, and the perspiration rolled from them. The deadly fever storm could not reach them, but it could make itself felt.

The air in the Schooner grew appallingly warm and close. Ordinarily the first relief would be to throw open a window.

But this could not be done now. The voyagers sweltered and perspired in a most uncomfortable fashion.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOUNTAIN HUT.

For two hours the white dust went sifting by. Then the sirocco began to abate its force.

The voyagers had stood the ordeal very well, considering everything. They did not venture to open a door or window until well assured that the storm had passed.

Then they emerged on deck with a sensation of relief. The blue sky was clear overhead, and the air was clear and bright.

Far to the southward the receding fever storm was seen. Our voyagers drew a breath of relief.

"I'm glad we did not encounter that under other circumstances," said Sears; "there is only one other storm that can at all compare with it, and that is the pitiless sand storm of the Sahara."

"I have heard of that," agreed Frank; "it is the real sirocco."

"Yes."

The Schooner was now driven forward at full speed. But now night came on once more, and it was deemed safer to abandon traveling after dark.

So the Schooner ran into a little covert among a collection of boulders and the searchlight was turned on. Barney was left on guard, and the others turned in.

They were right glad to get the sleep also, and none of them awoke until an early morning hour.

Then a nearer view of the mountains could be had, and they knew that they were now nearing the valley of ivory. Of course this increased the interest of all.

And as they drew nearer they could see that this was in appearance what popular repute had made it, a land of mystery.

Great, dark peaks overhung mighty chasms and deep abysses. The rocks assumed grotesque shapes and forms and added to the general uncanny aspect.

It was not to be wondered at that the various native tribes and the white explorers as well should yield to a superstitious sense, knowing that these wilds were the home of fierce giant blacks, perhaps the only race of giants in existence.

It was safe to say that few ventured to invade those hills with their black fastnesses. Fear most wholesome kept them from it.

But our voyagers felt secure aboard the Schooner. They knew that they possessed a tremendous advantage over any foe which might see fit to attack them.

So they approached the forbidding mountains without the least thrill of fear or caution.

Frank and Sears were in the pilot-house all the while.

Gradually they drew nearer the heights. The land began to rise now in successive tablelands or shelf form. Soon the plain they had crossed lay below them.

A great distance to the southward there was an immense body of water, doubtless one of the great chain of lakes in Central Africa.

An unbounded view was now to be had.

How to pass beyond the great mountain chain became now the problem.

"It is impossible to go over those heights," declared Frank. "We must find a pass somewhere."

"I am afraid that will be difficult, judging from the outlook," declared Sears. "It don't seem to me as if there was a break anywhere in those solid mountain walls."

"Well, I must agree with you," said Frank; "yet it is our only course. A pass we must find."

So the machine continued to move slowly along the base of the mountain range.

The voyagers scanned the rocky steeps closely.

And as they were thus engaged Pomp suddenly cried:

"Golly! Marse Frank, does yo' see anyfing up dere?"

"What is it, Pomp?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"Fo' de lan' ob goodness, I done fink it am a house, sah."

"A house!" exclaimed Sears. "By Jove, Frank, there is some sort of a curious habitation far up there among the rocks."

Frank at this instant also caught sight of the house, as Pomp had called it. It was of the character of a lean-to, and was evidently constructed of bamboo poles and grasses.

Many such huts were to be seen on the low land and in the jungles; but it was very strange to find such a habitation in the mountain heights.

The materials of which it was constructed must necessarily have been carried there at great expense of effort. Here was a mystery on the start.

The voyagers studied the hut curiously. As yet there was no visible sign of human life about it.

If it was occupied, no sign of its tenant was visible. Was he one of the giant blacks, or some venturesome hunter from the lowlands?

This was a question which the voyagers were not at the moment able to answer. They studied the bamboo hut a long while.

Then Sears asked:

"What do you think of it, Frank?"

"It beats me."

"Shall we go on?"

"Not until we have solved that mystery. I want to know who occupies that dwelling, and I mean to do so."

"Good! How shall we do it?"

The young inventor was thoughtful a moment. He finally replied:

"There is but one way, and that is to pay the place a visit."

"I'm with you," declared Sears, picking up his rifle. "Shall we start now?"

Barney's eyes stuck out like moons.

"Shure, Misther Frank!" he cried, "yez'll niver do that. They'll be aafter seeing yez afore yez kin get half way up there."

"There is no other way," declared Frank; "the Schooner cannot get up there."

"That is true," agreed Sears. "We must take some risk. I believe we shall be safe by keeping in the cover of rocks and trees."

So it was decided to risk paying a visit to the hut. The Schooner drew close to the mountain wall, and the electric gun was trained upon the hut.

Frank's orders were:

"Barney, keep your eye on that hut. If you hear us fire or know that we are in trouble, send a shell into it."

"All right, sir," agreed the Celt, as he took his position.

Equipped with their rifles and plenty of ammunition, Frank and Sears left the Schooner. They disappeared among some cedars and began scaling the mountain side.

Neither spoke as they climbed on, for they realized the value of silence. But Frank was doing a heap of thinking.

Both were on the alert.

Up and still up they climbed. Thus far there had occurred nothing to show that the hut was occupied or that there were any blacks in the vicinity.

Up they climbed and soon clambered over the ledge which brought them in full view of the hut. It was not fifty yards distant.

And not ten yards from them both saw a beaten path leading up to it. This was evidence that the hut was visited, if not occupied.

"Well, I'm beat!" exclaimed Sears, "the people must be away, Frank."

"They don't seem to be about."

Then the two voyagers looked at each other. It was to each a question of possible safety whether it would be best to enter the hut.

Finally Frank raised the hammer of his rifle.

"We have come too far to turn back, Sears," he said.

"Right."

So together they slowly approached the hut. Straight up to the entrance they went.

It was indeed a venturesome thing, for, for aught they knew, a deadly foe might lurk within and strike them a blow when they least expected it.

Frank led the way into the hut. As their gaze became used to the gloom they noted one fact.

It was empty.

The occupants, whoever they were, had absented themselves very recently, for in a heap of ashes in the center of the earthen floor a few embers yet smouldered.

The interior of the hut was squalid and dirty. A patched tiger skin suggested a couch in one corner. There were

some earthen vessels of rude manufacture, and some dried rhinoceros meat hanging from a pole.

In fact, the place was a typical black's habitation.

But where were the blacks?

A surprise was in store for the explorers. They looked about the place critically and then at each other.

"It's queer enough," exclaimed Sears. "Where do you suppose these chaps are?"

"They may return at any moment. Do you fancy this is a habitation of the elephant hunters?"

"No, sir!" replied Sears, emphatically.

"What, then?"

"This is the abode of the common negro of the jungle class; but how he came to build it way up here in this place, and so near an enemy's country, is a mystery."

"Perhaps it can be easily explained," said Frank.

"How?"

"These hills may not be the ivory hills after all. We may be upon the wrong track."

For a moment Sears was staggered. But he shook his head, doggedly.

"No," he said, "these are the hills we are in quest of, I am sure. We shall find the Giants' Valley over there, have no fear."

Before either could speak again a startling thing happened. A sound came from outside which for an instant chilled their blood.

It was a chorus of hoarse, cackling laughs. In an instant they leaped out of the hut.

A most astounding spectacle was presented to them. About the clearing there were thronged a legion of the strangest men they had ever seen.

They were black and half-naked, with rude javelins and shields. But they were dwarfs in size.

Pigmies, they were, literally, and for a moment the two explorers gazed at them dumbfounded. Escape was out of the question, for fully a hundred of the fierce little blacks surrounded them with javelins poised.

"The dwarfs!" finally gasped Sears. "Well, here is a go, Frank. We are in a bad scrape now."

"Dwarfs!" exclaimed Frank. "I thought the natives of these regions were giants."

"And so did I," declared Sears; "but it seems there was a mistake."

"What are we going to do?"

"Heaven knows! In all Africa no race is more savage and merciless than the dwarfs."

The dwarf blacks had begun to close in about the two men in a fierce and threatening manner.

CHAPTER V.

MAKING TERMS.

Words fail to express the sensations of Sears and Frank Reade, Jr., at that moment. The situation was a desperate one.

What was to be done?

This was the question.

They might shoot down a few of the diminutive blacks, but that would only seal their own fate. Frank adopted what he believed was the most safe and wisest move.

"Put down your gun, Sears," he said. "We must temporize with them."

"All right."

Each dropped his gun, and they held up their hands in token of amity. For a moment the dwarfs paused. Then their chief came forward.

He made some strange, piping talk, and the dwarfs fell back. He was an odd-looking little chap with a projecting stomach like that of a veritable alderman.

He stood before the two white men a moment regarding them critically. Then he uttered a few unintelligible words.

Sears, who had more experience with blacks than Frank, undertook to make answer. He could only do this with signs.

The little dwarf entered into the spirit of the thing for a time, and with such success that Sears presently whispered to Frank:

"These dwarfs own this whole region. As near as I can learn they live in a huge cave in these hills, and they are deadly foes of the elephant hunters."

"Good!" cried Frank, "so also are we. Did you convey that to him?"

"I did."

"Then why can we not make friends with these little dwarfs? Their co-operation will be of value to us."

"We will try it."

Sears continued his sign talk. It had a marvelous effect. The explorer led them to the verge of the cliff and showed them the Schooner far below.

This had a curious effect. They at once went tearing down the mountain side and surrounded the machine. Frank and Sears were dragged with them.

Barney and Pompe, on board the Schooner, were intensely alarmed. But they kept cool and steady. Barney shouted from the pilot-house to Frank:

"What shall we do, Mr. Frank?"

"Keep perfectly cool," replied the young inventor; "don't open the doors or windows!"

"All roight, sor."

The legion of dwarfs surrounding the machine were not satisfied, but actually climbed over the rail of the Schooner and onto the deck, but the windows and doors resisted their best efforts.

And Barney devised a simple scheme to get rid of them.

He connected the steel outer shell of the machine with the dynamos by means of a small wire. Then he turned on a light current.

It stung the hands and feet of the blacks, so that they were glad to hop to the ground in lively order. This puzzled them greatly.

Meanwhile, Sears was every moment winning the confidence of the old chief. In a short while the cool explorer was able to actually decoy him on board the Schooner.

This tickled his vanity greatly, and he was completely won over with a few handsome gifts. This settled matters at once.

The dwarfs from that moment were fast friends of the voyagers. Frank was only too glad to make an alliance with them.

Then it was learned that the elephant hunters were forty miles distant in the heart of the mountains. They were constantly at war with the dwarfs.

Physically they were much superior, but the dwarfs were more strategic and held their would-be destroyers at bay.

Also they were possessed of a stronghold which the giants were literally unable to assail. The entrance to it was not one hundred yards from the decoy hut.

It consisted of a very narrow pass of tortuous, winding shape, and which emerged into a mighty tract of rich land lying right on the mountain tops and accessible only by this narrow pass.

A dozen men at the mouth of this pass could hold a thousand at bay, hence the advantage could be readily seen.

From time immemorial the giant blacks had endeavored to destroy the dwarfs, but they had always got the worst of the conflict.

Buhdayo, the chief of the dwarfs, took Frank and Sears through the pass and showed them the mountain home of the dwarfs.

In most things they were utterly unlike the forest dwarfs described by Livingstone and Stanley, and which are but a trifle removed from the savage habits of the gorilla.

An alliance was at once made with the dwarfs.

Buhdayo, the chief, gave much valuable information about the elephant hunters or black giants.

His description of them was terrifying indeed.

There was no cruelty of which they were not capable. They were more savage than the beasts, more vindictive than the deadly bush snake.

Nothing would evidently please the dwarfs more than to inflict a crushing defeat upon the elephant hunters.

They confirmed the story of the mountain of ivory, and also told of a rich gold mine in those parts where the black giants beat out armaments and weapons of the pure metal.

This was enough to at once whet the interest and curiosity of the voyagers.

They could hardly wait to make a start for the giants' home. Buludayo, the dwarf chief, entered into the spirit of the enterprise with avidity.

It was planned that the dwarfs were to proceed by the most direct route to the northern entrance to the Black Valley. The Schooner was to approach from the south.

Here there was a pass which must be forced, and which, doubtless, could easily be carried with the aid of the electric gun.

While the machine was entering the valley from the south, the dwarfs could be fighting their way in at the north.

Forced to defend both entrances to their stronghold, the giants would be compelled to divide their forces. This would be a great advantage gained by the attacking party.

It ought to result in the defeat of the giants and the conquest of the Black Valley.

The dwarfs were quickly armed and equipped for the expedition. But nightfall being at hand, it was decided to wait for another day.

The distance over the mountains to the stronghold of the elephant hunters was fully forty miles. It would take two days' hard traveling to cover that distance.

That night the dwarfs had decided to hold a war feast, and that the white men might enjoy it, they had selected the tableland below as the place to hold it.

"Begorra, naygur," cried Barney, thumping Pomp on the shoulder, "here's yer chance to have a go wid some av thim foine black ladies. Shure, it ain't ivery day a man kin be dancin' wid his own people in his native land."

"Huh!" sniffed Pomp, "dey ain' no relashuns ob mine. I'se a Norf Caliny darky, I is."

Barney roared at this.

"Oh, go on wid vez!" he cried; "it's a poor man as will go back on his native soil. Shure, yer ancestors cum from this very counthry."

"Dat ain' nuffin' to me," replied Pomp, obdurately. "I ain' 'bliged to 'sociate wif dat trash out dar!"

If there was one then, Barney delighted in it was tormenting Pomp. And we might say vice versa.

But the darky was not in the pleasantest sort of a mood, so he snapped the Celt up.

"Look yere, yo' big stuff ob an F'ishman!" he cried, angrily, "yo' ain' got one lig, but ob course, yo' ain't."

"Ho, ho! Yez are afther gittin' excited," roared Barney; "don't keer about mixin' wid yer relashuns, dh? Got pooly high-toned, ain't yez, naygur?"

This was too much for Pomp.

"Lor's a massy!" he yelled, lowering his head like a mad bull; "I'se jes' gwine to gib yo' pay fo' dat, yo' sassy F'ishman! Huh, dar!"

And straight at Barney he rushed. The Celt dodged.

It was lucky for him.

If the darky had come into contact with him then, it would have given his nervous system a serious strain. But he didn't.

Instead, Pomp's head struck full force against the doorpost of the pilot-house. The crack would have killed a white man.

But it did not even stun the coon. He drew back, shivered once, and then made another rush.

This time Barney was not quick enough, but he grappled with the coon and both went down.

Then followed the liveliest kind of a scrap. Neither seemed to have the advantage for a long time.

They rolled over and over, and panted and struggled and tugged for the mastery.

Not until both were so extremely exhausted that they could exert themselves no more did they desist.

Then Sears chanced to come in upon them. He burst into a roar of laughter.

"At it again, are you?" he cried. "Well, who is high man this time?"

"I jes' lambasted dat F'ishman fo' his impudence," sputtered Pomp. "I reckon he don' wan' to tackle dis chile ag'in."

"Begorra, it's poor consolashun yez have," retorted Barney. "Yez are worse done up than meself."

"The both of you look plugged," laughed Sears. "I think it was an even thing."

"Don't yez belave that, sor."

"Shut up, yo' F'ish muff!"

"I'll basto yez fer that!"

"Yo' kain't do it!"

But at that moment a familiar voice, that of Frank Reade, Jr., came down from the upper deck.

"Barney, come up here."

"Aye, aye, sor," and away scampered the Celt. This settled the feud for the time.

CHAPTER VI.

FETE OF THE DWARFS.

It was a lively racket which Buludayo's people had planned. The white men watched these preparations with much interest.

Great heaps of brush and fagots were placed at intervals along the mountain wall. The women, dressed in their gayest, were grouped at one end of the great level space, and the men at the other.

Twenty little boys marched out beating a discordant drum akin to the tom-tom of the New Zealanders. Also a dozen more followed blowing harsh notes upon a sort of reed instrument.

The bonfires on the mountain had been lit, and the weird glow illumined the whole space. It was as strange a scene as any white explorer ever gazed upon.

"It makes me think of Gulliver's description of the Lilliputs," declared Sears. "These African dwarfs are unlike any other race on the earth."

"They are Africans," said Frank.

"Undoubtedly, but of a new and strange species. Certainly, we have not met anything akin to them."

"That is true."

The boy musicians, meanwhile, had marched to the center of the open space. Here they formed a sort of square, and then a loud signal was given by one terrific blast upon the instruments.

In an instant it was responded to by the men who came tripping out in single file and made a lively march around the circle. Next the women fell in, and in a trice the table-land presented the spectacle of hundreds of dwarf men and women dancing madly in a motley mob.

After the first figure was over, there seemed to be little system to the dance. It was a wild romp, a helter skelter melee of mirth and exuberance.

"It can hardly class with the 'Two Step' or the 'Mazourka,'" declared Sears. "Yet I must say it is evident that the dancers are enjoying themselves."

"That is right," agreed Frank.

At that moment the bonfire on the mountain wall grew dim. This caused some confusion.

"We will remedy that," said Frank, giving an order to Barney.

In a few seconds the glare of the searchlight made the vicinity as bright as day. The dwarfs were astonished as well as delighted.

Buludayo approached Frank and in sign talk asked him how he had captured the sun to use at night. Frank was at a loss how to explain, but finally managed to satisfy the old chief.

The dance went on.

It was a scene of joy and mirth. But not unlike similar occasions of the past, it was brought to a termination in a tragic manner.

During the festivity, there had been no thought of danger.

No report had reached the dwarfs for months of any meditated attack by the giants. Therefore, they could anticipate nothing of the sort.

But as fate had ordered it, this very night was the one of all chosen by the elephant hunters for a descent upon their ancient enemies.

The mountain side to the north was covered with the giants, fully armed and ready for battle.

When they came in view of the fete there was no end of delight. They felt certain of victory now.

The dance was at its greatest height when the blow came.

Frank and Sears were about ten yards from the machine. As luck had it, Sears chanced to glance up the mountain side.

He was astounded to see giant forms come leaping down in the gloom.

There was no mistaking the fact; these were giants, and they were coming to attack the dwarfs.

"My soul!" gasped the explorer. "Look there, Frank! What shall we do?"

Frank gave one look.

Then his face turned deadly pale. He sprang back with a gasping cry.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed, "they will be exterminated!"

Indeed, this statement might not have been far-fetched under ordinary circumstances.

Taken so unawares, it would be by no means a difficult thing for the giants to literally wipe their dwarf enemies out of existence.

The latter were unarmed and defenseless. Before they could hope to secure arms and make a stand it would be too late.

This was easy to see. For one moment Frank was too horror-struck to move or act.

Then the blow came.

Down over the rocks came the armed giants. They swooped down upon the dwarfs like a legion of fiends.

They carried all before them.

The contrast in their size was awful to contemplate. Burly giants picked up dwarfs as if they were puppets and crushed them to death by sheer force of superior strength.

The scene was too awful for description. The shouts and cries of the terrified victims, the hoarse yells of the attacking party went up on the night air.

All this was occurring in the glare of the searchlight. Frank and Sears were instantly on board.

Frank sprang to the electric gun. But if he fired into the struggling mass of humanity he would kill as many friends as foes.

He sent a shot up the mountain side to check the approach of more of the barbarians.

Then he cried to Barney and Pomp:

"Get your repeaters, boys. Pick them out the best you can."

The crack of the rifles blended with the shrieks of the struggling people.

The sight was one to make one's blood boil.

So well did our voyagers use their rifles that a space was cleared between the giants and the dwarfs. This gave Buludayo's men a chance.

They covered the retreat of the women and children to the pass, throwing away their lives freely to do so.

Then arms began to arrive. A stand was made on the upper shelf of rock. The rifles were doing such deadly work that for a moment the giants were held in check.

This was Frank's opportunity.

"Now I'll settle with them," he muttered, as he went to the electric gun. He quickly trained it.

When the shell struck right in the midst of the giant column, it looked as if no power on earth could save the dwarfs from annihilation.

Giant blacks were already forcing the pass above. Once that was carried the career of Buludayo's people would be at an end.

For so merciless were these people that they would not leave one dwarf—man, woman or child—alive.

But the dynamite gun, Frank Reade, Jr.'s wonderful invention, changed all. It was a complete turning of the tables.

The shell struck in their midst. There was a thunderous roar and an earthquake shock. A baleful glare for a moment showed the scene.

The air was full of flying stones, dirt, tree-stumps and

the lifeless bodies of giants. A space many yards square was blown out of the mountain side.

Those familiar with the power of dynamite can imagine the fearful scene. Words are inadequate to describe it.

Before such a fearful shock, such an unheard of supernatural attack, the giants could not stand.

A score of them had been destroyed in that shot. But the balance fled incontinently.

Frank sent another shell after them with fearful execution. But it was enough.

The giants did not return to the attack. The assault was a failure. Victory sided with our voyagers and the people they had championed.

The dwarfs came tumbling down upon the plateau in mingled grief, gratitude and delight.

Grief at the loss of hundreds of their number, gratitude and delight for Frank's repulse of the foe.

They crowded about the machine unable to comprehend the magic power which had intervened to save them, but ready to worship their preservers as gods.

The voyagers gazed with horror upon the ghastly scene on the plateau. There were hundreds of dead and wounded, and the work of ministering to these was begun at once.

It was not until the next night that the process of caring for the wounded, and burying the dead, was finished. Our voyagers did valiant service, and when all was over, old Buludayo, crying like a child, came and flung himself at Frank's feet.

Fully two hundred of the giants had been killed. This was some atonement, but, as Frank declared, not enough.

"We have a warrant now for invading the Black Valley," declared Sears. "If we discover that Ivory Mountain we will confiscate it."

"Those blacks are worse than fiends," declared Frank. "They menace this whole region; no peaceable people can live near them. They are murderers and ought to be exterminated."

The dwarfs were now more bitter than ever against the elephant hunters. They clamored for Frank to lead them to the Black Valley.

This the young inventor fully intended to do, but first he called Buludayo to him, and said:

"You must leave a strong guard of men at home to defend your women and children. If you do not, they may suffer for it."

The aged chief promised to abide by this advice. It was hard for any of the dwarf warriors to remain at home, as all had someone to avenge.

But the chief's orders were obeyed, and a strong body-

guard was left in the pass. A hundred men could easily hold it.

Fully fifteen hundred armed dwarfs fell into line behind the Schooner the next morning. Not one of them but was ready to die in battle.

Thus the invading party started for the Black Valley. All that day they traveled with rapidity.

But the nature of the country would admit of not more than twenty miles being covered. At night they camped on a little eminence near a river.

Pickets were put out, and a man at the searchlight kept the vicinity well inspected. For it was a well-known fact that the giants were aware of their purpose, and were hovering about in the jungle.

But our friends were resolved to guard against any possible surprise. So every precaution was taken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ADVENTURE ON THE RIVER.

Along the verge of the river there was a great depth of saw grass. This is the case with most tropical rivers.

Nothing could afford a better hiding place for an enemy in canoes. And the giants knew this.

As chance had it, they knew that the attacking party must cross this river. Nothing better could be conceived than to station warriors in dugouts in the saw grass.

As the dwarfs appeared to ford the river, they could be shot down in the current with javelins and arrows. It was a good bit of strategy and worthy of the brain of a savage.

Now, none in our party dreamed of there being a foe in the saw grass or on the river. As the camp was right by the river's bank, the natives went down to bathe and frolic in the water.

"Begorra," muttered Barney, "I'd loike a dip mesilf. Didn't vez say there was a canoe down there, naygur?"

"Yo' am right, Fish," replied Pomp.

The dwarfs had brought along with them several war canoes and dugouts, for just such an emergency as the present.

What was more natural than for Barney and Pomp to conceive the idea of a paddle on the river? The night was starlit and glorious. It was a temptation not to be resisted.

They did not mention their intention to anyone, but strolled down to the river side.

It was not a difficult thing to secure a canoe from the blacks. Then they paddled out into the current.

"Be me sow! this makes me think av the beautiful Liffy," cried Barney; "shure, it's a treat to me."

"Golly! it looks to me jes' like the Tombigbee, down Souf in 'Merika," declared Pomp; "dis am a reg'lar southern ribber, chile."

"Bejabers, I'm afther thinkin' it's an Afrikan river," averred Barney.

"Ain' gwine to disputashun dat, honey. But dese yere Afrikan ribbers kain't compare wif de Tombigbee. Dey ain' in de same class!"

"Are yez goin' to take a dip, naygur?" asked Barney.

Pomp was amazed.

"Wha' yo' fink ob? Take a dip in dis yere ribber?"

"Why, cert, yez ould stuff."

"I don' reckon I will."

"Why not?"

"Ain' got no inclinashun to be eated up by any ob dese yere 'gators, which yo' may be sure am in dis ribber."

"Alligators!" exclaimed Barney, with a shiver. "Be me sow! I niver thought av thim. But phwy the devil don't they take a hould av thim pickanninies over there, will yez tell me?"

"Huh! Yo' kin bet dey don' go berry far out into de ribber."

"Yez are roight, naygur. Well, I'll sthay in the boat. But I don't intind yez shall have all the soft snap yesilf. Give us a little more on that oar!"

"Ain' got no oar. Dis am a paddle."

"Call it phwat yez will. Lark out there! Phwat did yez hit me fer?"

Barney whisked about and glared at Pomp. But the latter sat in the stern, quiet and wondering.

"Wha' dat yo' say? I didn' hit yo', honey."

"Yez didn't?"

"No, sah."

"Begorra, something did."

And Barney was right. An object had come hurtling out of the saw grass and struck him fairly on the back of the neck.

It was a javelin, but it glanced off into the water before he could see it. The point of the weapon had grazed his neck, but the shaft had struck him in passing.

The next moment something came down with a thud into the bottom of the canoe.

The astonished Celt grabbed it and pulled it up, making a great rent in the bottom of the canoe, it being of dressed hide and nothing thicker.

"Bejabers, it's thim divils afther us!" screamed Barney, holding the javelin up. "They're over there in the saw grass, to be shure. Luk out fer yerself, naygur!"

Another javelin whistled over Barney's head.

The uncertain light destroyed the aim; but a greater peril asserted itself now.

The rent in the bottom of the canoe of course let the water in in a great column. It shot up through the aperture and quickly filled the canoe.

"Golly!" screamed Pomp, "we'se got to swim fo' it, chile. De 'gators get us now, fo' snah!"

"Shwim!" gasped Barney, "an' among the alligators. Mither av Moses! it's the ind av us!"

But there was no choice nor time for temporizing.

The canoe took a plunge, and the next moment both men were in the water.

They instantly struck out with frantic efforts to swim to the shore. The deadly fear of the crocodiles lent them wings.

Splashing and floundering in the water, they attracted the attention of the swimming dwarfs, and they shouted and swam toward them.

It was then that the black giants decided to make their attack. The air was full of flying javelins.

At once the alarm was given. The dwarfs who were armed came trooping down to the edge of the jungle and fearlessly met the giants. Frank and Sears, aboard the Schooner, were looking for Barney and Pomp.

It was lucky for the two jokers that this part of the river was not infested with the crocodiles. Else they must have been eaten up.

As it was, however, they reached the shore in safety just as Frank sighted the electric gun and sent a shell into the jungle.

The dwarfs and the elephant hunters were having a lively battle. Of course the latter would have soon gained the upper hand had it not been for the assistance of the Schooner.

But the black giants could not stand before that deadly fire. It was a mysterious, deadly force which they did not understand.

So, as a result, they broke and fled in terror. A few shells mowed down that part of the jungle and put them to flight.

The battle was brief, and once more a victory for the Schooner's party, but Barney and Pomp resolved to venture out upon African rivers no more.

"Golly, I jes' fo't I felt dem 'gators' jaws coming down onto me eb'ry minnte," declared Pomp. "I'se jes' callin' mahself a lucky coon!"

"Bejabers, I'll niver go out on any more rivers in this part av the worruld," said Barney, positively. "It was jist enough for me, you kin bet!"

The giants did not venture to return to the attack again that night, but they hovered about in the jungle, and occasionally threw javelins into the camp.

The next morning the march was resumed. Frank reckoned that they ought to reach the Black Valley by night-fall.

So, as the caravan moved on through forest and jungle, the travelers all looked forward to the events of the next day, which were in prospect.

"We shall see the Mountain of Ivory before two days," declared Sears, with much satisfaction.

"Well, I agree with you," said Frank: "we ought to do that."

When high noon came they camped under the black arches of a mighty forest. Here were great troops of apes, and marks of the gorilla were found.

Thus far the blacks had been little in evidence. But as the party camped for the noon meal, a fresh incident occurred.

Frank and Sears were discussing the situation and laying plans for the invasion of the Black Valley, when a startling sound reached their ears.

It came from the distance through the great forest, and was most unusual for those parts.

Crack—aek! Crack!

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Sears, in sheer amazement; "did you hear that, Frank?"

"Indeed I did."

"You know what it was?"

"It sounded like the report of rifles."

"And so it was. But—it can't be Barney and Pomp. They were here a moment ago."

At this moment Barney and Pomp sprang aboard the Schooner. They were much excited.

"Golly, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, "dere am somefin' goin' on ober dere."

"Begorra, it's somewan as has guns to foight with," cried Barney; "it must be whoite men, sor."

Frank and Sears rushed out of the vehicle. Even the dwarfs had been attracted by the distant sound.

Buludayo came up with much sign talk, to the effect that his men craved permission to visit the distant scene.

Finally Frank said:

"Come, Stanley, let us take a party of these dwarfs and go. It means something, I hardly know what. Perhaps they are a party of our own countrymen in trouble."

"Aye, aye!" cried the young explorer, "that is doubtless the truth. I am with you, Frank."

Barney and Pomp were left in charge of the Schooner. Buludayo selected a score of his best warriors.

These he placed at Frank's disposal, and the start was made. Away through the forest they sped.

And as they went on it seemed as if the sounds of conflict were drawing nearer, until they were really quite close at hand.

And after forty minutes of hard climbing and running, the relief party burst through a network of vines and beheld an astounding spectacle.

A number of blacks were first seen driving a dozen strong oxen hurriedly through the brush. Then white helmeted men, armed with Winchesters and firing rapidly as they beat a slow retreat, came into view.

Our adventurers shouted in recognition, and a more surprised set than this new band of African explorers were, can hardly be imagined.

They came rushing up hastily, a half dozen white men in all, and greeted Frank and Sears profusely.

"My name is Anthony Gardner," said the leader of the party, a tall, finely-formed man with iron-gray hair and whiskers; "glad to meet you. Where are you from?"

Frank and Sears introduced themselves, and then Sears asked:

"But where are you fellows from?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE IVORY HUNTERS.

"We are from Chicago, Illinois," replied Gardner. "We are Americans, as well as you. We are in Africa partly for adventure and sport, and partly to look up a certain large quantity of ivory which it was said the natives had in these parts."

"Not the Mountain of Ivory?" cried Sears, in amazement.

"Well, perhaps so. They say it is a mountainous pile."

"Well, I'll be blowed!" exclaimed Sears, in sheer amazement. "That is just what we are here for."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I am surprised!" declared Gardner. "Your errand, then, is the same as mine?"

"Exactly."

"If I mistake not, we are not far from the valley held by these terrible black giants, who hold guard over the Mountain of Ivory?"

"We are half a day's journey from it. But how did you count upon acquiring possession of the ivory?"

"We intended to treat with the blacks, if we could. If not, we should use our Winchesters to bring them to terms."

"That was a large contract."

"So we have found; for we have done nothing but fight ever since entering these parts."

"Well, well," repeated Sears, hardly able to realize the situation. "This beats all I ever heard of! However, Mr. Gardner, we shan't quarrel over the ivory."

"By no means. We used it only as an incentive to exploration. You shall have every bit of it."

"Oh, no; it shall be a fair division," declared Sears. "But—your men are having a lively time there!"

"Yes, the giants are too many for us. They have killed fifty of our Matabeles since we left the coast."

"Mercy! You had better fall back on our camp. We have an electric gun there which will very soon put a check upon their advance."

"I am very glad to accept your suggestion," declared Gardner; "but first let me introduce my companions."

This was done, and among them was a tall, sad-faced man, whose name was Gerald Hardy. As he gripped hands with Frank Reade, Jr., Gardner said:

"Mr. Hardy has had a terrible blow since coming into Africa. When he left America his daughter, Grace, a very beautiful girl of seventeen, insisted upon accompanying him."

"Argument and persuasion were of no avail. She was bound to come, and did so. Mr. Hardy has had cause to regret this. Grace traveled in a sedan-chair and was the life of our party. She is an excellent riflewoman, courageous to a fault, and had a knack of cheering up our spirits when depressed."

"But, alas! One night, it was not two days since, the giant blacks attacked our camp. The assault was unexpected, and we were for a time in much confusion. In that mixed state of affairs Grace vanished, and we have been able to find no trace of her since. What her fate is we cannot learn. Either she was carried away to captivity, or was murdered by those wretches. We did all we could to get some clue as to her fate, but as yet it remains a mystery."

Sears had listened to all this with the most intense of interest. His figure trembled like an aspen, and his eyes were fierce in their glow, as he cried:

"That is a fearful thing. There is no doubt but that she was carried into captivity, and we must rescue her!"

"Pravo!" cried Frank. "We shall find her in the Black Valley. Here is another reason for an invasion!"

"Right!" cried Sears. "Cheer up, Mr. Hardy: your daughter shall be saved, if such a thing is possible."

"God bless you for those words of comfort," replied the bereaved parent, with moist eyes.

"We are in luck in falling in with you," cried Gardner: "do you tell me that you have a large number of natives in your train?"

"Nearly fifteen hundred," replied Frank. "They are dwarfs."

"And terrible fighters, as I have heard. It looks to me as if we had better join fortunes."

"I think it would be best," said Frank. "There is strength in union."

Slowly the party fell back upon the camp of the dwarfs. The giant blacks were savage and persistent. But they had run up against a sturdy foe.

And as soon as Frank could get the electric gun to work, the sequel was short and swift. The giants were forced to retreat.

The Matabeles in Gardner's command quickly fraternized with the dwarfs. The force now organized to invade the Black Valley was a formidable one.

Gardner and his companions regarded the Schooner with admiration and wonderment. Frank took them on board and showed them all over it.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Gardner, "I don't wonder that you felt secure in invading this region. You have precious small risk."

"Well, that is true," agreed Sears. "I have made a number of attempts to invade the Black Valley with even larger forces than you had, and each time was nearly annihilated."

"Then our prospects were not of the best, you think?"

"I know it. You would have met with utter defeat!" Gardner winced at this.

"Well," he admitted, "events thus far seem to indicate that you are right. We were getting the worst of it when we met you."

"I knew the folly of such an attempt from experience," declared Sears. "But when I learned that Mr. Reade had invented the Desert Schooner I made up my mind that if I could enlist him in the scheme I should be all right."

"And you were right," agreed Gardner. "I am anxious to go forward."

"Is your party all right to proceed?"

"Quite ready."

"Then let us go forward."

Camp was broken at once. They were now not ten miles from the Black Valley.

They ought to reach it by nightfall. But an entrance, of course, was not to be thought of until the next day.

Somewhat to the surprise of all not a giant was encountered on the way.

They seemed to have drawn off for some unknown reason, and for the first time the rear of the train was not harassed by them.

Gardner was puzzled.

"I don't understand it," he declared. "They are up to some mischief, be sure. We shall hear from them yet."

"I believe you," agreed Frank; "they are working some new scheme."

"I hope we'll be able to get onto it," declared Sears. "To-night I shall try a little scouting."

"Better not risk it," adjured Frank.

But Sears was not to be dissuaded. From the first moment of learning the story of Grace Hardy, he had been a different man. Some fate seemed to be leading him on, and he muttered:

"I am to rescue that girl; I know it, I feel it!"

It was very dark when the invading party reached the entrance to the Black Valley.

Camp was quickly made in a spot reasonably secure from attack. The dwarfs and the Matabeles made rude huts of palms and cane.

Pomp, on board the Schooner, prepared a rousing meal, at which Gardner and his companions were invited guests. It was to them a mighty treat.

Not one in the party but was nervous and excited. They were thinking of the assault upon the stronghold on the morrow.

The giants had proved themselves no despicable foe. It was by no means certain that the Schooner even would be able to force its way into the valley.

There were but two means of entrance. One at the north end and one at the south end of the valley.

The first plan had been that the dwarfs should attempt to enter by the southern pass and the Schooner at the north. But Frank and Sears had, of necessity and prudence, changed these plans.

It was decided safer and best to unite forces and make one grand and common assault. And this was done.

Sears had not abandoned his intention of a scouting tour after dark. He did not fear consequence.

He had passed some years in the wild West and had

learned how to outwit the foe in the bush. So, as soon as the camp was quiet he stole away into the gloom.

He was armed only with revolvers and a knife. He made his way with the agility of a cat up the mountain side.

Gliding on through the gloom, he took care to use his sense of hearing and touch to the utmost. In this manner he gained a point fully a mile from the camp gleaming so far below.

He was now, he believed, not far from the pass by which entrance to the valley was made. But at this juncture strange sounds reached his ears.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "that is curious! What is going on?"

He listened again.

A dull booming and crashing noise came at intervals to his ears. It caused a slight concussion of the ledge upon which he was.

Determined to learn the truth, Sears now took a mighty chance. He crept along over the ledges toward the pass.

His position was now one of great peril. At any moment his life might be sacrificed.

For it was safe to assume that the giants were gathered at the mouth of the pass to repel the invaders. There was the almost certainty of stumbling upon them.

But at this moment Sears caught sight of a bonfire. It was burning just within the mouth of the pass.

And by its light he beheld an astounding spectacle. The entire mouth of the pass was blocked with mighty boulders and stone. High up on the mountain wall were legions of giant forms hurling others over the verge.

The young explorer was more than astonished at this sight.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed, "that is a crafty trick. They are barricading to prevent the Schooner from entering. That is indeed a clever trick."

Sears did not venture nearer.

He watched the proceedings for awhile. Then he prudently retired.

He made his way safely down the mountain side and into camp.

All were asleep when he entered, so he also turned in. Not until the next morning was this last move of the giants generally known.

The dwarfs and the Matabeles were armed and drawn up in battle array. The white men under Gardner were to officer them.

Then the Schooner began to slowly climb the mountain side. Those on foot deployed to right and left.

Through a fringe of trees the attacking party went. Then the mouth of the pass came into view.

It was, as Sears declared, blocked with boulders. Here was an obstacle. But Frank only smiled grimly.

"Go on," he said to Barney.

Up the slope crept the machine. But now a new and deadly peril presented itself.

A great cry went up from all. For upon the mountain wall a huge fragment of rock was seen to sway and totter. Strong arms were behind it.

The next moment down the mountain side it came with the velocity of a cannon ball. Straight for the Schooner it was bent.

There was no time to get out of the way. Those on board gave one horrified gasp and half closed their eyes, expecting to be crushed into eternity.

But the crash did not come. What followed was to all a most astonishing incident, little short of miraculous.

Just before the awful boulder reached the machine, it struck an obstacle, an up-cropping of the ledge, and gave one giant leap into the air.

Clean over the Schooner it shot, and crashed down the mountain in its rear. Saved by a hair's breadth truly.

For a moment those on board the machine were white as chalk and unable to move.

Then Sears exclaimed:

"Saved!"

"A close call," said Frank.

"Begorra, won't they be after sendin' another down afther us!" cried Barney.

"Right!" cried Frank. "Get your rifles and pepper that spot."

Barney and Pomp obeyed and Frank took the wheel. Once more the Schooner crept up the slope.

At this juncture another boulder was dislodged. But it went far wide.

All this while the dwarfs and Matabeles had been climbing up to the mouth of the pass. They deployed right and left until they reached the sheer wall of the mountain.

This they could not scale, and it was easy for the giants to throw down their javelin with fatal effect. The natives were falling by dozens, and were powerless to cope with their foe.

The outlook was most grim.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT AT THE PASS

There was great excitement in camp the next morning. Active preparation were made for the attack.

"By Jove, Frank!" exclaimed Sears, "they will be exterminated at that rate. What can we do?"

Frank set his lips firmly.

"Push on," he said.

The machine crept up the side of the mountain, nearer to the pass. Frank went up on deck to where the electric gun was.

He sighted it for the top of the mountain wall, and fired a shell at the spot where he fancied most of the foe were gathered.

Not one of them could be seen. But the shell struck in a heap of boulders and reduced them to powder.

Giant blacks could be seen fleeing in all directions. A veritable nest of them was broken up.

"Give it to them!" cried Frank. "Pick them off with your rifles, boys."

The white men cheered and the black dwarfs yelled. Then the fusillade of the Winchesters began.

It was lively on that mountain side for a time.

Shell after shell was sent screeching up among the boulders. The elephant hunters were driven back like mist before the sun.

Scores of them were picked off by the riflemen. In a short while the whole vicinity was cleaned out.

The dwarfs and Matabeles were safe now, but Sears now regarded the obstructed pass, and said, lugubriously:

"They yet have the best of us, Frank. How can we get in through that pass?"

"We will see," said the young inventor.

He adjusted another shell and sighted for the mass of boulders. When the shell struck them there was an immense cloud of dust. Much of the stone was reduced to powder.

Others were dislodged and reduced to fragments. The barricade settled visibly.

"That's the stuff!" cried Sears, excitedly. "If you can keep that up, Frank, we shall be all right!"

"I think I can," muttered the young inventor. "We will try it."

Again and again he hurled the awful dynamite bombs into the pass. Of course such treatment could not help but have some effect.

Gradually the barricade settled until it was hardly twenty feet high.

Then Frank ceased firing.

"It is impossible to clear it all out of the defile," he said.

"But I have a logical plan."

"What is it?" asked Sears.

"We can build a road over that crushed heap of bould-

ers if we can secure the service of the dwarf. Just a coating of dirt over the obstruction and a little grading and the machine will go over all right."

"Good!" cried Sears; "it shall be done."

He rushed away to find Buludayo. The aged chieftain at once embraced the task eagerly.

In less time than it takes to tell it scores of the dwarfs were at work grading the height. In a comparatively short space of time the task was done.

The machine was not only able to pass over it, but the entire army of natives followed.

This was a great step toward victory. They were sure to get into the Black Valley now.

What other obstacle the giant blacks could devise it was hard to see. The spirits of the invaders were up to a high notch.

Upon the other side of the obstruction the pass was clear but devious in its course. Once over, the Schooner picked its way slowly along to the end of the pass.

Not a giant was seen.

What they were up to it was hard to guess. But that they were up to some mischief there was little doubt.

"Well," said Frank, laconically, "if we fail to whip them, now that we have got into their valley, we are certainly no good."

"You are right," cried Sears; "but I don't fear that."

The great army of natives followed the Schooner to the end of the defile. Emerging from this, the first view of the Black Valley was had.

And that it was rightly named everybody was agreed.

It was fully six miles long by three in breadth. Its floor was smooth and green carpeted.

Upon all sides rose sheer walls of rock to the height of a thousand feet or more.

It was plainly seen that the only access to the valley was the pass at each end.

Nature could not have contrived a more wonderful retreat or more ideal fortress.

And there, in the center of the valley, the adventurers beheld a thrilling sight.

A mighty white mound rose in the air almost even with the height of the cliffs on either side. Its base must have covered fully an acre.

And this great pyramid, or hill, was composed of ivory tusks laid one upon the other, the fruits of hundreds of years of toil in securing them.

For hundreds of generations the elephant hunters had contributed to this gigantic achievement. Of course the

ivory was all good, for there was nothing in the climate to effect its destruction.

There was a fabulous fortune in that immense heap of bone, as all realized. And they gazed upon it with many and varied sensations.

"At last!" exclaimed Sears. "By Jove! I had almost given up all hopes of ever seeing it."

"What an enterprise to market that ivory," suggested Gardner.

"There need be no fear but that it will yield us each a good fortune," said Sears.

"Indeed, that is true!"

But what claimed the attention of the dwarfs was the city of huts and hovels which formed the habitation of the elephant hunters.

An immense army of them were advancing across the plain to meet the invaders. Women and children could be seen among the huts.

Frank regarded the scene with a clouded brow.

"I can't say I like this," he said.

"Why?" asked Gardner.

"Well, these people are coming out to defend their homes. They believe their cause to be just. We are an invading foe."

"But they would not hesitate to assail us under the same circumstances."

"That may be true. Yet the taking of human life, even though it be that of a savage, is repugnant to me."

"Why need we take their lives?"

"If we advance upon them there must be slaughter, and it very likely will be a battle of extermination."

"Is there no way to treat with them?"

"Do you know of any method?"

"Wait!"

Gardner spoke to one of the Matabeles. He came forward and answered the ivory hunter in broken English.

"Malolo," said Gardner, "do you think you could talk with those blacks over there?"

Malolo nodded eagerly.

"Yes," he replied, "me do so."

"Here, take this white handkerchief on a stick and go out and talk with them. Will you do it?"

Malolo consented to carry the flag of truce. Then Gardner gave him instructions.

"Tell them," he said, "that we have a terrible fire-stick which can eat them all up. Tell them that if they will restore the white girl to her father safely and sell the ivory mountain, their lives shall be spared and we will be their friends."

Malolo noted the message carefully, and sped away.

The invaders now paused to await the result of this. The truce was seen and heeded by the giants.

Malolo was seen holding a lengthy conference with them. Presently, however, he came skipping back. All were eager to know the result of his efforts to make terms.

CHAPTER X.

CAPTURE OF THE VALLEY.

Malolo came hastily back from the parley with the black giants. His stoical face betrayed nothing, but he marched up to Gardner, and said:

"Big chief of elephant hunters say he no give up Ivory Mountain, nor white girl either. He heap fight, die, be burned and everyfing afore he do dat."

The white men were deeply disappointed and chagrined with this reply.

For a moment Gardner's face flushed with wrath unspeakable. Then he turned to Frank.

"Do you see what an obdurate, merciless set of pirates they are?" he cried. "There is no other way but to whip them blind."

Indeed, Frank had begun to share this same impression. So he finally said:

"Forward all! Perhaps when they see that we mean business they will come to terms."

And it was with this hope and almost firm belief that Frank ordered the advance.

The Schooner went in front. Everything was ready for the strife.

The doors and windows were closed. Knives had been put on the wheel-hubs, and every man was at a loophole with his rifle.

Frank, however, was at the electric gun. He was studying up a plan to make the fray a bloodless one.

But this was by no means easy. The dwarfs and Matabeles kept cautiously in the rear.

They would much rather have met their giant foe in the bush than in the open. Close quarters with them was bound to be disastrous.

But they all had faith in Frank Reade, Jr., and the electric gun. Else they would not have advanced with their present confidence.

The black giants came forward in double line. There seemed fully three thousand of them.

This was an enormous body of men, and especially men of their size. So far as numerical strength went, our adventurers were far outclassed.

But science is bound to go ahead of brute strength. The deadly electric gun, the creation of a human brain, offset easily the odds against them.

The giants seemed to have either confidence or reckless determination. They were not wavering in the least.

"By Jove, they mean to sweep us out of the valley if they can!" cried Sears. "Is there no way to check them, Frank?"

The young inventor smiled grimly.

"I think there is," he said.

He placed a shell in the gun. He trained it, but not upon the advancing host.

He could have easily thrown a shell into their midst which might have killed a hundred. But he did not do this.

He aimed for a line of grassy hummocks, just in front of the giants. Then he pressed the valve.

The conical shell was imbedded a number of feet in the hummocks. Then it exploded.

The result was fearful to witness. Great clouds of earth and debris were thrown for many feet over the body of blacks.

A hole big enough to bury a hundred of them yawned at their feet. What could they do but halt?

Another shell at that instant burst just the other side of this one. It produced the same effect.

Shell after shell was thus thrown at the feet of the wavering giants. Then Frank threw one into their midst to complete the demoralization.

It mowed the warriors down in a mighty circle, and piled their bodies up in heaps.

Words cannot express the situation.

This last stroke was the straw which broke the camel's back.

Even courage itself could not endure in the face of such supernatural and inexplicable power.

The elephant hunters were desperate men, but they could not stand this.

They broke line and began to retreat. Frank smiled and chuckled, and ordered the Schooner forward.

He could now begin to see a comparatively bloodless victory, and that was what he was working for.

Shell after shell fell hot at the heels of the demoralized giants. They sullenly beat a retreat.

It was probable that the women had received instructions before the men went out to fight.

For the straw and palm huts were now set afire, and the women and children began to beat a hasty retreat to the upper end of the valley. This was a piece of Spartan sacrifice worthy of an ancient race.

"The victory is ours!" cried Sears. "We shall clear the valley easily. Give it to 'em, Frank!"

Pursuit of the giants was kept up until they were driven far beyond their burning village. Then the pursuers came to a halt.

"Better drive them out of the valley completely," said Gardner. But Frank shook his head.

"No need of that," he said; "they have lost all. They will go now."

And Frank's prediction proved correct.

The giants left the valley and the Mountain of Ivory behind them. But they took with them that which was the most important of all.

This was the captive girl, Grace Hardy. Her father was frantic with the hopelessness of a rescue.

But Sears set his lips firmly, and his eyes flashed.

"Have good courage, Mr. Hardy," he said; "she **shall** be rescued. I will give my life to effect that."

"You are a brave and noble fellow," cried the father. "God will bless you if you succeed."

But further pursuit of the giants at the moment was not considered. The ivory fever seemed to have seized all.

They rushed to the great pile of tusks and gloated over the mighty wealth there represented. Gardner even ventured to climb half way up the mound.

Every one of the tusks, so far as could be seen, was sound. Here was, indeed, a mighty treasure.

The native huts were by this time little more than smouldering ashes. The dwarfs used them to cook their meat by.

The long day was drawing to a close. As it would be useless to pursue the giants that night, it was decided to camp where they were.

Gardner and his companions were busy discussing the disposition of the hill of ivory.

There seemed no better way than to establish a special carrier line to the coast.

These carriers were secured from the ranks of the dwarfs. They were tireless, hardy fellows, and could travel many miles in a day.

It was arranged that regular stations should be established, about five miles apart, all the way to the sea. The first carrier receiving his load of ivory carried it to the next station five miles away, where it was carried by another man to the next station, and so on to the sea, each carrier

after delivering his load retiring to his post to receive a fresh load.

This was the quickest, surest and safest way. It would insure the ultimate safe transportation of the ivory to the coast in a continuous daily stream. Whereas, to attempt to transport it in bulk was nigh impossible.

This very ingenious plan was adopted. But before it was put into execution some thrilling things happened.

It was deemed an imperative act to go in quest of Grace Hardy. To leave her to her fate would be inhuman.

It was not deemed necessary to take a large force.

The Schooner, with Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, Sears and Mr. Hardy, were all. The rest were left in charge of Gardner, who already had the dwarfs at work on the pile of ivory.

The next morning the Schooner set forth on the trail. No scruples were experienced in leaving the party to take care of themselves.

It was hardly deemed likely that the giants would return to the attack. If they should, better means of defense could be established, and they could at least be held at bay until Frank could return with the Schooner.

Thus matters were arranged to the satisfaction of all. At an early hour the next morning the rescue party set forth.

Straight for the upper end of the valley the machine struck out. Over the smooth turf a fair rate of speed could be attained.

The trail of the retreating blacks was ineffaceable, and could easily be followed. Soon the walls of the valley began to converge into the pass.

Eagerly the distracted father paced the Schooner's deck.

He had all sorts of doubts and fears. It seemed almost too good news for him to hear that Grace was alive and uninjured.

It seemed reasonable that the black brutes would murder her for sheer revenge upon their white foes. But yet there was hope.

As the Schooner entered the pass the trail narrowed and was quite plain. Frank began to entertain a fancy that they might overtake the blacks before long.

But in this he was doomed to disappointment. It did not take long to traverse the pass.

Then they emerged upon the northern side of the mountains and beheld a remarkable stretch of country. The great lakes were apparently near at hand.

The intervening region was rocky and barren. It suggested the rocky fastnesses of ancient Arabia, where were the den of Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves.

From the mouth of the pass the trail descended into this uncanny region. And now the ground, becoming flinty and scaly, it was hard indeed to follow the trail.

In fact, a new and unlooked for difficulty was encountered. The wily blacks had evidently foreseen the present exigency.

This had led them to adopt a clever ruse.

The trail here diverged in a hundred directions. The purpose of this was to mislead the pursuers and divert pursuit.

And it worked effectually. Of the hundred different trails, which was the proper one to follow? The pursuers halted in sheer perplexity, and for a time the problem held them baffled. What could be done?

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAVERN.

It was clearly impossible to attempt to follow every trail. This would be a sheer impossibility.

What was to be done?

Frank and Sears got out and examined the trail. Hardy watched them with deep interest.

"That was a clever trick," declared Sears. "These blacks are sharp fellows."

"This is an Indian game," said Frank, "such as you might expect with the Apaches in Arizona."

"Is there no hope?" asked Hardy.

"Oceans of it," replied Sears, cheerily. "Of course they cannot escape us utterly. This is only hindrance and not defeat."

"We must go on at random and not heed the trail," declared Frank. "I think we shall soon stumble upon them."

So the machine went booming on at hazard through the rocky defiles. It was the best move that could be made under the circumstances.

The blacks would have gained precious time if the pursuers had paused to disentangle the multitude of trails. Frank was too shrewd for this.

So, as fortune had it, the Schooner hit upon just the right track. Suddenly, in turning an angle among the ledge, the rear guard of the retreating blacks came into view.

"Heigho!" yelled Sears. "There they are, boys!"

No ceremony was considered. Fire was at once opened with the Winchester, and it was lively enough for a time.

The blacks could make little return, for the white men were shielded by the armor of the Schooner, and their javelins could make no impression on that. So the best thing they could do was to flee.

And they hustled into narrow defiles and niches, where the white men could not follow them. In less time than it takes to tell it they were dispersed.

The defile was clear, and the Schooner pressed on; but it was to meet with an astonishing revelation.

Directly in front of them there yawned the open mouth of a mighty cave. Into this doubtless the giants' main body had passed.

Here was a sticker. The Schooner could not very well force its way into the narrow underground passage.

What was to be done?

There was no means of guessing the depth or capacity of the cavern. It might extend for miles underground. In that case the blacks had successfully eluded their pursuers.

For to attempt to invade the place on foot would be far too dangerous.

Scores of the foe could lurk in the dark recesses and strike a death blow without danger to themselves. It would be suicidal to attempt to enter the place.

Here was a setback. For a time the pursuers were non-plussed.

Frank Reade, Jr.'s inventive faculties seemed, for a time, to be literally at a standstill.

There was no doubt but that Grace Hardy had been taken into the cavern with the blacks. She was, for the present, beyond rescue.

The person most deeply concerned, her doting father, was sorely distracted. It seemed as if he must abandon hope now.

"Heaven help us!" he said. "I am afraid I shall never see Grace again. Oh, what madness to have brought her into this wretched country!"

"Don't give up, sir," said Sears, in his cheery manner. "Something may turn up, you know. Keep a stiff upper lip."

The machine made a wide detour of the vicinity. Every point of vantage was carefully studied.

But no evidence was found that the cavern did aught but strike deep down into the center of the earth, and there seemed no other entrance. This led Frank to conceive a ray of hope.

"If this is the only outlet as well as entrance," he declared, "we have them like rats in a trap. They will be glad to come to terms rather than starve."

"That is too much to hope for," declared Sears. "Wait until darkness comes. I have a plan."

"What is it?"

Sears' plan was hardly approved by Frank. The daring young adventurer proposed to venture into the cavern alone, after dark, making himself up for a black by the use of some burnt cork, which he possessed among his effects. The idea was certainly a striking as well as seemingly feasible one.

"Why, I tell you," he said, "that I can make up so that after dark you would not know me from a black."

"But you are not a giant," said Frank; "don't forget that."

"That is true."

However, the daring young explorer was determined to carry out his scheme.

He could at least gain some idea of the interior of the cavern, and perhaps learn the location of some other entrance or outlet. It was barely possible that he could learn something of the fate of Grace Hardy.

So, when the shades of night had settled thickly down, Sears proceeded to make himself up. He stripped, save a breech clout, and blacked himself from head to foot.

With a wig, and simulating the negro walk, he was in the gloom a genuine African. Moreover, he looked taller and larger now that he was made up.

The other voyagers heartily wished him success. Just before midnight the daring fellow slipped down from the Schooner's deck and slid into the gloom.

It was a trick which really required more than an ordinary amount of nerve for him to execute. There were many chances against his life.

He knew not but that his first step into the cavern might mean a javelin through his body. But his was a nature which craved adventure, so he did not think of faltering.

He sidled along carefully until he reached the mouth of the cavern. Then he slid into the inner shadows.

As he did so he had a thrilling experience. He came in full contact with a naked giant body. For a moment Sears believed himself lost.

But he heard only a guttural grunt like a curse and was hurled aside. He knew then that he had run into a giant and that his identity had not been suspected.

The black was probably impatient at what he considered his fellow warrior's stupidity. That was all.

At any rate, it was as close a call as he wished to experience, and he guided himself accordingly. He crept along close against the cavern wall.

He could hear forms moving about him and sibilant whis-

pers, and he knew that he was in the very midst of the foe. What more thrilling situation could be imagined?

Discovery would be death. Yet Sears' nerves were steel. He leisurely penetrated the cavern until he suddenly caught sight of a distant light.

It was a fire of fagots built in one of the cavern chambers. Sears was at once interested.

And there in the cavern chamber he saw the black women and children gathered. They were moving about and chattering in apelike fashion.

Sears ran his gaze over them, and gave a thrilled start. Among them was one rarely beautiful face, a pearl in a rude setting.

It was Grace Hardy. Her face was very pale, but very lovely. The black women moved about her, and did not seem to treat her unkindly.

Sears drew a deep breath.

"Thank goodness, she is safe!" he muttered.

And then:

"Jove! Is she not beautiful!"

The more he feasted his gaze upon the young girl the greater was the danger of his becoming spellbound. His first impulse was to rush forward and effect her rescue.

But the impracticability of this move now dawned upon him, and he recovered himself. He bethought himself of his present ridiculous attire, or rather lack of attire.

So he contented himself with merely looking at the fair captive and making a mental effort to effect her rescue.

But no possible method suggested itself. He finally grew desperate.

He even ventured nearer the throng of women in the hopes that he could get a word with Grace. In this he succeeded.

By carefully edging his way along he managed to get in a spot just back of the young girl. And just at that moment a fortunate thing happened.

By the merest chance she rose from her seat and sauntered to the other end of the chamber.

None of the women paid any special heed to this movement, for there was no avenue of escape in that direction.

But it brought her within easy speaking distance of Sears. The young explorer's heart beat like a trip-hammer. The young explorer's heart beat like a trip-hammer.

Once Grace glanced in his direction. In the gloom she saw the outlines of what seemed to her merely the form of one of the blacks, nothing more. But suddenly she saw this fellow make a peculiar gesture with his hand.

Instantly her attention was attracted and she was interested. What did it mean? Surely, this black was trying to communicate with her in the deaf and dumb language.

Too astonished for action, the young girl stared at the action of the slender, black fellow. Then she involuntarily began to read the alphabet, with which she was quite familiar.

"I—am—a—friend," she read.

Then in a moment more:

"Have no fear. Your father and friends are nearby to effect your rescue."

Grace might have fainted, but she was a plucky girl, and did not hesitate to make reply:

"You give me hope. For this I thank you."

"I am glad to serve you. How can I get you safely out of here?"

"I know not."

Sears was by this time intensely excited. He tried to think up a legion of plans for effecting the rescue of the young girl, but he was completely at a loss.

At last, in despair, he realized that his friends aboard the Schooner would be anxious to know the result of his expedition into the cavern.

Also, they might be able to suggest a method by which the rescue could be effected. So he signaled the captive again.

"You are safe here for the present?"

"Yes; these women are not unkind to me."

"Then I will return to my companions and confer with them. Have good courage; we shall rescue you."

"I thank you"

The girl's face had undergone a marvelous change. Young Sears hardly knew what made his veins tingle, or his heart beat so fast as he glided away.

Keeping deep in the shadow, he was soon in the outer cavern. The giant blacks were yet gathered there in the gloom, but he managed easily to step by them, and was more quickly in the outer air.

He made a circuit of the open space, and then at a proper moment glided up to the Schooner.

As he reached the rail he heard a low voice:

"Is that you, Sears?"

"It is!"

"Thank heaven! I was afraid you would never come back!"

"You know the story of the bad penny. Here I am!"

Over the rail he went, and the next moment he was in the pilot-house. He was warmly welcomed by the others.

"Yes," he said, in response to various queries. "I have been into the cavern and—what will be good news to you, Mr. Hardy—I have spoken with your daughter."

Hardy gave a wild scream, and tottered forward.

"Is that true?" he cried. "Do not trifle with me!"

"It is true!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE END.

The overjoyed parent was, for a moment, too intoxicated with joy to speak.

Then he showered questions upon the young scout.

Sears answered them all to the best of his ability.

"Yes," he replied, "I found her unharmed and brave. She was surprised to find herself in communication with a friend. It is safe to say that she never dreamed of my being a white man."

"Which is a joke," laughed Frank. "You make a fine-looking African, Sears."

"Thank you."

"Begorra, the naygur here is jealous av yez," declared Barney, with a grin.

"Shut up yo' head," snapped Pomp, making a biff at the Celt.

It was a happy hour. Though as yet Grace was a prisoner, and there was no logical plan as yet devised for her rescue, it was something to know that she was alive and unharmed.

At once all set about devising the plan of rescue. For a time this was a mighty problem.

Then Sean declared:

"I have a theory."

"Ah!" was the general exclamation.

"I believe we have these fellows trapped. They are all packed into this cavern, men, women and children. There is I believe but this one outlet. It will not require many hours to force them to terms, for they cannot find means of subsistence in that cavern."

There was silence for a moment.

Then Frank said:

"Your plan is to starve them out with a siege?"

"I see no better way."

"But Grace," interposed Hardy; "we shall be starving her, too."

This was true enough. Yet how could the strife be won in any other way? But at this very critical moment the change in affairs came.

A cry came from Barney in the pilot-house.

"Shure, Misther Frank, wud yez be afther comin' up here?" he cried.

Frank at once complied.

Barney pointed toward the cavern.

"Do yez see that, sor? Shure, it's my idea they want to speak wid us."

In the mouth of the cavern stood the huge form of a giant black, waving a torch. Frank at once picked up a lantern and stepped out on the deck.

The torch-bearer, finding his signal answered, came nearer. He held the torch up and made some guttural remarks.

Frank, of course, could not understand these. But while he was wondering what they meant an explanation came.

The light of a dozen torches illuminated the cavern. In its mouth appeared a number of the giants. And a great cry went up from Hardy.

In their midst there stood Grace Hardy, tall and beautiful. Her captors led her forward with many gesticulations.

"Did you ever!" cried Sears; "they mean to surrender her!"

"Thank heaven!" cried the father.

"They have come to terms."

"Yes."

"Accept their terms, Frank!" cried Sears; "tell them so with signs."

Frank endeavored to do this. The blacks seemed satisfied, and a moment later Grace Hardy was in her father's arms.

The blacks disappeared in the cavern. To assure them of his good faith Frank at once started the machine away up the mountain side by aid of the searchlight.

In the excitement Sears had forgotten his personal appearance. He stood eagerly close by Hardy, who, after effusively embracing his child, turned, and said:

"And we owe much to Mr. Stanley Sears, this gentleman here, who spoke with you in the cavern."

Grace turned and gave Sears a sweeping look. In that instant the explorer became conscious of his make-up, and realized that he was hardly in presentable shape with his only garment a breech clout.

"Indeed!" said Grace, sweetly; "I owe the gentleman much gratitude for his words of cheer, and——"

But Sears gave one terrified gasp, and yelled:

"Oh, I forgot! Pardon me," and he fled from the cabin in wild confusion. Everybody howled, and it is no more than fair to say that Grace joined them.

When Sears appeared shyly on the scene a while later, he was in the conventional white man's garb, and as handsome a man as any young girl would care to meet.

"I trust you will pardon my forgetfulness in appearing to you as I did, Miss Hardy," he said, bashfully.

"Don't apologize," she said, merrily. "As long as you indulged in that horrible make-up for my sake, I surely can afford to overlook it."

"That is a most gracious pardon, and comes from a generous heart," said the young explorer, gallantly.

Grace blushed and sweetly protested. Whereat Sears, of course, fell into other graceful little gallantries; but of them we will not speak more.

Slowly up the mountain side the Schooner crept.

A short while later the pass was reached. From here, by means of many torches far below, the black giants could be seen filing out of the cavern. It was certain that they had abandoned the strife and were decamping for another part of the country.

It was a grand victory for the white explorers. The Mountain of Ivory and the Black Valley were to be their portion of the spoils.

"It hardly seems fair to take the ivory without paying them for it," said Hardy; "it was their property, and to them a sacred monument."

"But what good was it to the world at large?" argued Sears. "It was doing them no good. It will be of use to the civilized world, and taking it deprives them of what was practically of no value to them, except in a supernatural way."

"The ivory is part of the spoils of war," said Frank.

"Bejabbers, they'd have mighty hard worruk to get it back now," affirmed Barney, at which all laughed.

The machine was not put through the pass that night.

But when daybreak came the pass was made, and the Schooner was soon again in sight of the Mountain of Ivory.

As the vehicle drew near, it was seen that Captain Gardner had already begun work on the ivory.

It was being sorted and sewed up in skins, and prepared for shipment to the coast. As the Schooner appeared much excitement was created.

Gardner and the others were, of course, delighted to learn of the success of the trip, and that Grace Hardy had been rescued.

All came forward to congratulate her, and it was altogether a happy occasion. Then bright plans were laid for the future.

Anthony Gardner and his colleagues announced the intention of remaining in Africa until the ivory mine was exhausted.

"I have taken a fancy to the climate," declared the Yankee, "and I like it here, first rate. I have already engaged Buludayo and his people for carriers to the coast. If you do not want to remain here, Hardy, go back to New York and manage that end of the business."

"Very well," agreed Gerald Hardy; "that will suit me perfectly well."

And so it was arranged that the party, with the exception of Gardner and his men, should return to Libreville and sail for America.

The main object of the expedition had been accomplished and there was nothing now to remain in Africa for.

Hardy and his fair daughter, Grace, were to be passengers aboard the Schooner. This was a source of delight for the young explorer, Stanley Sears.

The original plan had been to remain in Africa, but now, somewhat singularly, business interests called him back to America.

He had grown sick of traveling, he declared, and was for settling down in a home of his own. Frank Reade, Jr., listened with a smile.

And even Barney and Pompey were dead onto the explorer. Before the coast was reached Sears knew his fate.

They had encamped one lovely evening upon a beautiful tableland. The moon hung a disc of silver in the sky, and the tropical country was bathed in its sheen.

At this witching hour, Sears chanced to come upon Grace Hardy, sitting upon an isolated rock, and enjoying the scene. Sears was a polished gentleman in any drawing-room, but now he felt as awkward as a bear.

"Pardon me," he said, sinking down upon the sward near her, "but may I crave the pleasure of sharing with you this enjoyable prospect?"

"You are very welcome," she replied, naively. "I will not refuse you a share of anything so beautiful. Is it not charming?"

"The effect is heightened by——" he choked, and could say no more. What fiend is it that tongue-ties a lover at the most critical point?

"By the splendid moonlight," finished she. "Ah, yes, it is grand. Indeed, I am afraid there would be little visible of all this natural scene of beauty were it not for the moon."

He shot a covert glance at her. Was it sarcasm?

Then his cheeks burned as he repelled the thought. It was not a thing of which her sincere nature was capable.

"I—I didn't mean that," he stammered; "that is——"

"Oh, perhaps you mean that it is the landscape which gives the moonlight its opportunity——" she began.

"No!" he cried, impulsively, "it is this whole scene which gives me my opportunity. Oh, Miss Hardy, I——"

Then he became tongue-tied.

It was plain that Grace was now astonished. She leaned forward a trifle and said, practically:

"What are you talking about, Mr. Sears?"

How he came to say it Sears never knew, but he blurted forth:

"You!"

The trim little figure straightened a bit. Everything swam about Sears. It was a long interval of silence; then the young explorer heard a sound very like a mothered laugh.

Did he hear aright? This straightened him. Was she making a laughing stock of him? Then she was silently making fun of him! He was instantly dignified. But a low, sweet voice, with a tinge of merriment in it, said:

"Did you mean that my presence here, to-night, Mr. Sears, heightened the appearance of the landscape, the moon, or——"

Sears sprang up.

"What a consummate fool I am!" he cried. "You know my meaning, Grace. Grace, fairest of the fair, I love you!"

That settled the little romance. When all stood safely on the deck of the homeward bound ship once more, Stanley Sears plucked up courage to ask Mr. Hardy for the hand of his daughter. They were to be married within six months of a safe arrival in New York.

And that voyage home was a propitious one. But when the steamer had sighted Sandy Hook, all gathered on deck to behold once more, with tears of joy, the shores of their native land.

The great trip to the Black Zone had been a success.

The mountain of ivory was sure to make a mighty fortune for its owners. Nobody could deny this. But all were bound to admit that the great triumph was due wholly to one man.

That was the true hero of the occasion, Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor, by the construction of the Desert Schooner, had made possible the conquest of the black giants and the acquisition of the ivory mountain.

But Frank refused any share in the profits of the enterprise.

"I went to Africa solely for sport and adventure," he declared. "I have money enough for my needs, and care for no more. I thank you."

And this settled it. But at the wedding of Stanley Sears and Grace Hardy, a few months later, Frank Reade, Jr., was the most honored guest.

It was a happy occasion. Among the gifts was a beautiful diamond of many karats and fabulous wealth, sent by

the dwarfs of Buludayo. It was found in the Black Valley.

The ivory business proved a gold mine for its projectors for years. All returned from the Dark Continent very wealthy. With this statement let us take our leave of them.

And Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp to-day regard

their trip to the Black Zone as one of the most exciting of their career.

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